

---

## **ERGONOMIC INNOVATIONS IN DESIGNING AND APPLICATION OF ASSAMESE TEXTILES**

**Dr, Sanjita Chetia**

**Associate Prof.,Dept. of Home Science, Digboi Mahila Mahavidyalaya**

**Digboi - 786171, Assam,**

Assam is the land of a number of ethnic groups each having a distinctive identity of its own. But remarkably this ethnic diversity has hardly impeded culture in the state. With the diversity in their customs and traditions these groups have lived side by side for ages, shared a common history and evolved in the process of culture that may aptly be called 'Assamese Culture' (Gogoi, 1993).

Assam has one of the richest traditions of woven textiles made from different materials and by using a variety of techniques. There are however, immense variations in the styles of weaving and designing that have by and large been retained and perpetuated by the people because of their distinct cultural traditions expressed through their socio – cultural lives.

Weaving as a handicraft, occupies such an important place in Assamese society that both culture and economics are inter-linked to it. Textiles produced in the family looms with beautiful eye catching designs is a prestigious and possession for every Assamese lady. It is a must in every social function of the Assamese people. As a matter of fact, textiles and designs produced in handlooms, not only have economic importance but also represents a sentiments which is manifested in the social customs of the people.

The Assamese hand-woven textile designs as we observe today, are in most of the cases the result of the influence of a variety of cultural groups inhabiting the region. This prolonged and ongoing process of mingling of Assamese and tribal designs provides a very interesting situation that sometimes tends to change the total outlook and expression of a design. It thus provides a suitable area for an intensive anthropo-historical study to understand the various aspects of this process of acculturation.

Most of the studies directly or indirectly reveal that the Assamese textile designs that are observed today are the outcome of the influences of a number of other cultures, mostly the tribal one. Gogoi (1985) observes that the traditional textile designs and motifs were intricately associated with the beliefs and faiths of the people in North-east region of India. The adopted religion did not change their beliefs or faiths. The emotional and psychological inspiration from the ethics and customs are reflected in the use of special dresses on ceremonies such as marriage and other social functions. There are some particular ornamental fabrics, which are decorated with traditional motifs having some symbolic meaning.

The term Motif is defined as the distinctive feature or the dominant idea in an artistic or literary composition. Design, on the other hand, is used to convey

different meanings. According to Oxford Dictionary, it refers to the combination of parts in a whole. The term

Design is actually derived from the Latin word *designare* meaning to mark out. Used as a verb, it means to make a plan or pattern for a unified or coherent whole. When used as a noun, it means the manifestation of that plan or pattern in the completed whole.

Accordingly, Held (1972) defines design as the ordered arrangement of the parts to make a whole. The parts, in case of textile, according to him, are the raw materials of weaving that include the fibre, yarns and the miscellaneous objects, the weaver has at his disposal. The whole is of course, the finished product like the wall hanging, sculpture, garment, yardage or whatever it may be. In ornamentation of textiles, the term design implies the arrangement of motifs or units. These can be woven on a ground of plain or twill or satin by floating definite extra warp or weft elements. Design is very important aspect of weaving, it lends intricacies and adds beauty to the fabric. It may however, relevantly be noted here that sometimes the word design is loosely used as a synonym for pattern or motif.

Bhavanani (1969) reports that Assam is noted for the weave and ornamentation, both in fine fabrics and delightful folk textiles. The former has the delicacy of decorative modes of floral scroll and linear patterns of folk decoration in geometric shapes, animals, birds and other symbols from nature. The silks are embellished with elaborate designs of floral pattern, the mango motif with its curving ornate top, combinations of jasmine flowers and star and some with animal frieze like borders, while others have stems and blossoms. The beauty of each piece is enhanced by artistic Colour combinations of deep red, green, a soft gold, saffron and blue etc.

In the present paper an attempt has been made to have a reasonably detailed idea of the motifs and designs used in the textiles of Assam along with their possible socio-cultural implications.

The very large number of motifs and designs found in different textile items, old scraps of design and in the design catalogues that have been collected during the course of the present investigation are conveniently grouped in the following five categories. In conformity with some other studies, as noted earlier, in the follow-up discussion, motifs and designs have been considered together and synonymously. The broad categories are :

## FLORAL MOTIFS AND DESIGNS

The floral motifs offer unlimited scope for adornment of the textiles. Flowers from the simplest and smallest configuration to those with well-defined petals are found in the textiles of Assam. *Padum* (Lotus) and *Golap* (Rose) are two flowers commonly found in the items produced by the weavers of the study area. Lotus is a religious motif. May be because of their auspicious implications,

---

both *Padum* and *Gulap* motifs have, traditionally, been used, generally, in fabrics of religious importance only. However, now-a-days, lotus is used as an item in the main border designs of all kinds of *chadar*; and rose is mostly used in *pat silk mekhela*, *chadar* and *saree*.

### **PLANT AND CREEPER MOTIFS AND DESIGNS**

*Gach* (Plant) and *lata* (creeper) are abundantly used in the textiles of Sualkuchi. Varieties of *gach* design, from simplest configurations to the most intricate ones, are suitably used as *butas* (single flower or motif) in different items produced by the people. This is by and large used in *muga* or *pat* or *pat-muga* (mixed) silk *mekhela* and *chadar*. The leaves of *am* (mango), *era* (castor) and *bel* (wood apple) occupy very important place in the designs produced by the weavers in Assam. On the occasion of worship or festival of sacred nature, the womenfolk of the household generally wear *mekhela-chadar* with mango motif capturing something of a magic tradition of simple beauty and to gladden the eyes of all who come and go. According to Dhamija and Jain (*op. cit.*), the *am* or *kalka* (paisley) is the most common and traditional motif in Indian textiles. It is observed in the textiles from many states, eg. Andhra Pradesh, Bengal, Gujrat, Jammu and Kashmir, Maharashtra, Tamilnadu and Uttar Pradesh (Varanasi). In Sualkuchi *am* motif is also known as *mogor*. The space within the *kalkas* of large size is generally embellished with plant motifs, mainly creepers. Traditionally, here, in Assam, the *kalka* suits best in the corners of a *chadar*. However, *kalkas* of various sizes are used singly as *buta* or as a unit in the border designs. *Era* is the food plant of *eri* silk worm. Rearing of *endi* (*eri*) cocoon is a common feature in the rural and tribal areas of the state. Patches of *era* plants are invariably seen in the compounds of rural households. Looking at the attractive shape of the *era* leaves, the local weavers might have felt inspired and adopted the leaf in their textile design. The design is named as *era patia*. It is mostly used in *pat silk mekhela*, *chadar* and *saree*. *Bel* is another motif, used in the various items produced in Sualkuchi. It is a sacred plant among the Hindus and its leaves are highly sanctified. *Bel* leaves constitute an important item in the *Shakta* mode of worship among the Hindus. The trifoliate arrangement of *bel* leaves has found its way into weaving as a motif in fabrics used on religious occasions by the Assamese people.

### **GEOMORPHIC MOTIFS AND DESIGNS**

*Charai* (birds) in general; and *Mora-charai* (peacock), *Hanh* (ducks and swan) and *Bhatow* (parrot) in particular are common motifs in the designs produced in Sualkuchi. Most of these are regarded as sacred motifs by the Assamese Hindus. Two *Moras* (peacock) facing each other forming an interesting design is named as *Juria-mora*. These are generally used as *butas* and repetition on border design for *mekhela*, *chadar*, *saree* and *shawl*. (ducks and swans) is regarded as a sacred motif by the people. The swan, in combination with lotus motif, is generally used on sacred clothes. Such clothes are referred to as *Gohain Kapoor* (Clothes meant for the Gods).

Parrot is the marriage bird of some of the Assamese castes. During marriage they generally fashion out its image from wood of cotton tree and display the same in the pandal. It is believed to be a learned bird that knows the four *Vedas*. The other animal motifs, used in highly stylised form in the Assamese textile, include fish, lion, tiger, elephant, horse, deer, dog and goat etc. These are however, the traditional designs used in the textiles of the tribal people of Assam that have in course of time diffused into the Assamese textiles.

*Hinghab* design is the most interesting Assamese design used by the people of Assam. This design originated from the *Kinghab* brocade designed cloth. It was previously with gold and silver threads woven in the clothes of the *Rajas* and the nobles. This was famous during the Ahom rule. The design seems to have been very popular and valued once upon a time; and has been continuing through generations. However, at present it is portrayed in a slightly modified form or in combination with other motifs. The design, now-a-days is made in tested *Zari* and cotton-dyed yarns. The motif of the design has been modified and named as *Hinghab*. The design has circular flower motifs with some intricacies along with two lions or birds inside. *Hing Sorai* is a modification of the *Hinghab* design. Here, birds like peacock together with flowers, creepers are present inside the circular flower motif. The design was used previously on Kings' and Queens' dresses, woven with gold and silk. Now-a-days, it is used for brides' *mekhela-chadar* and *driha*. Another traditional design depicts the wild life of the Kaziranga sanctuary of Assam. The design has animals like *Gor* (Rhino), *Horina* *Pohu* (Deer), *Chorai* (Birds), *Phool* (Flowers) and *Lata* (Creeper) that abound in Kaziranga. This design is mostly used in *pat* silk and *pat-muga* mixed *mekhela-chadar*, *saree* and *shawl*.

## STRUCTURAL MOTIFS AND DESIGNS

A great influence of material culture is often observed in the textile tradition of Assam. Artifacts and material objects, used in the socio-cultural life of the people are adopted for ornamenting the textiles. Such designs are classified under structural design. During the course of the present investigation, it has been found that the different types of ornaments such as *Gamkharu* (bracelets), *Moni Mala* (necklace), *Bena* (one type of necklace and earring) and *Dhul* (one type of necklace); and other material items like *Phulam Japi* (bamboo hat), *Sarai* (metal dish with raised border mounted on a decorated pedestal), *Ghati* (water pot), *Chaki* (lamp), *Dhupdani* (incense stick holder), *Kar* (arrow) and *Besani* (hand fan) etc; appear as motifs in the textiles of Assam.

*Gamkharu* design has motif depicted from a bracelet known as *gamkharu*. This design is used for the lower border in the *pat* or *muga mekhela* and *pallav* of the *chadar*, while the side borders of a *chadar* have half of the (*gamkharu*) design. In *Bihu* festival, a woman generally wears a *muga* set having thereon the *gamkharu* design. Because during the *Rongali Bihu* (New years Eve), the



Assamese girls wear *gamkharu* in their hands for dancing purpose. So, the origin of this design can be traced to that bracelet (*gamkharu*).

There is another structural design consisting of *Japi* and *Pepa* (trumpet), flowers, leaves, bud and stem with a supporting creeper. *Japi* is decorated with circle motifs, temple shape motif and with a half star. This is also known as *Phulam Japi* design. The design is used on borders of *gamocha* and also in *mekhela-chadar*. Beautifully decorated *Japi* and *Pepa* motifs are deeply associated with the Assamese culture. In the past, even some sixty years ago, the beautifully decorated *Borjapi* was given as present to the bride in the aristocratic families at marriage ceremony to protect her from rain and sun. It is also used for dancing purpose. In the *Bihu* festival women invariably wear *muga mekhela* set having thereupon the *Japi* and *Pepa* design.

## GEOMETRICAL MOTIFS AND DESIGNS

In the textiles of Assam, geometric designs, individually or in combination with stylised motifs have been used widely and since the olden times. An examination of the old textile pieces from Assam reveals that a good number of these are richly ornamented with various types of geometric designs.

The diamond motif with dot at the centre is very common in the Assamese textiles. But according to the weavers, the origin of the design is from tribal textiles. Though the motif bears different names in different tribes, the symbolic meaning is the same every where; it represents the eye. The other design found in the study area has a diamond within a diamond with a dot at the centre. It is locally called *guna-phutuki*. In conformity with the information provided by the weavers of Sualkuchi, Majumdar also observes that this diamond design originally belongs to the textiles produced by the Mishing, Bodo-Kachari, Karbi and the Rabha.

*Kech* is a geometrical design used at the edges. Geometric arrangement of lines and bands with different colours in ribbed pattern is called *Kech basa* or stripes design. It is used on the border of *riha*. *Riha*, as noted else where in the discourse is an important item of bridal attire on marriage ceremonies. Now-a-days, this design is modified and is used in *chadar* also.

## . CONCLUSION

Textile designing has been a very ancient art in Assam. Traditionally, a textile designer was also the spinner, weaver and to some extent a dyer. In conformity with the general requirement of designing, a handloom designer in Assam has always shown a deep love for nature. The designer meditates and studies the forms of natural objects, landscapes, hues of men, animals and birds; and gathers all the materials for his designs, forms and colours from nature. The designer then translates these forms into decorative motifs and subsequently into endless varieties of geometric patterns.

---

Thus, the handloom textiles of Assam exhibit various designs with their discrete symbolic meanings. However, with changing time and taste, modernization, in-road of mill-made textile items and the likes, it seems many of the traditional motifs and designs of the handloom textiles of Assam, are on the verge of disappearance. It is therefore, imperative that we need to have a very close investigation of this aspect of the Assamese textile so as to have an empirical knowledge of the traditional motifs and designs.

**Bibliography**

- Bora, M, 1992                      In gay abandon of the Bihu. The Eastern Clarion.  
    (An English Daily, published from Jorhat, Assam).  
    Sunday supplement, April 12, pp.1
- Gogoi, A, 1985                      Acomparative study of some historical textile  
    designs and symbolism of decorative motif in textiles  
    of Northeast India. An unpublished Ph.D. M.S.  
    University, Baroda.
- Sharma, H. 1991                      “Handloom in Assam”, in Silent Revolution. Edited  
    by Padma Barkataki. Guwahati Brahmaputra Valley  
    Regional Handloom weaves Co-operative Society  
    Ltd. PP. 172-175.